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SHAM

A PLAYLET OF TWO SCENES

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CAST OF CHARACTERS.

PHYLLIS KNIGHT, a cosmopolitan soubrette with a fairly good voice. some music hall successes to her credit and a wide education in gaining useful friends. She is about 26 years old and may be found one season in San Francisco and the next in London. Her life on the stage is one kind of "show" successful; her private life is an effort at maintaining another. She lives the usual electric light existence of her kind, never facing realities because they are never put in her way.

GUY ARMSTEAD, a journalist of sorts, a press agent and minor mender of plays with a numerous acquaintance among theatrical folk. He is the masculine counterpart of Phyllis, about 33 years old, good looking, well-built, smartly dressed.

DORIS SCOTT, a friend of Phyllis and one of the frivolity chorus beauties.

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SCENE I.

Dining-room in Phyllis Knight's apartment, Jermyn Street, London.

(*At rising, Phyllis and Doris are seated at table finishing breakfast. Phyllis is wearing a lingerie dressing-gown.*)

PHYLLIS (*Yawning*): Closing up the night clubs don't seem to get me into my stockings any sooner.

DORIS (*Looking at wrist watch*): Well, it's only two o'clock and I'm dressed already.

PHYLLIS (*Admiringly*): I should say you *are* dressed—you're all dolled up like a circus pony. Where did you get the rags?

DORIS (*Rising and gazing at her gown with an air of swank*): In Bond Street, my dear Phyllis—half price, and on credit, too. These bally tradesmen treat me like I was the Prince of Wales' Fund.

PHYLLIS (*Interestedly*): How do you do it, Doris?

DORIS: It's not me—it's the war that does it. The war has dropped a bomb on every shop in town.

PHYLLIS (*Rising, lighting cigarette and moving over to sofa*): Damn the war! (*Noticing small run in silk stockings*) Look at that stocking! Looks like an Uhlan had been trampling over it.

DORIS: Why don't you get some new ones?—simple matter.

PHYLLIS: What'll I get 'em with? I tell you my part in the new show's off. Trueblood's going to shove in a lot of war movies and hurrah-for-the-gallant-Tommies stuff, that he gets for nothing.

DORIS: Well, I'm on half salary myself—and what with my boy at the front I'm jolly well done in by this business.

PHYLLIS: The shows are all the same now. It's all war stuff and it's the people in the papers who are getting the jobs. Headline names—that's it.

(*Bell rings.*)

DORIS (*Rising*): Shall I go to the door?

PHYLLIS: Do. If it's Freddy Connors tell him I'm out. He comes around here now and talks about bus rides!

(*Doris goes to door and shows in Guy.*)

GUY (*Throwing hat, gloves, stick on convenient chair*): Good morning, chickens. How're your feathers?

PHYLLIS: Rotten!

GUY: What's up? You're both down in the mouth as a couple of Belgian refugees.

DORIS: I'm ill with moratorium—it's very fashionable now.

GUY: Well, shall I start a relief fund for you? I always believed in worthy charities.

PHYLLIS: Yes, the worthy unemployed. Trueblood fired me last night.

GUY (*Lighting cigarette*): How careless of him! I thought you had that split skirt song. Trueblood told me your flank movement in that number was sure to win. (*Burlesques ragtime wriggle.*)

PHYLLIS: Aren't you smart? That stuff would go big. But you've got to rehearse in a hospital to get over now.

DORIS: Yes, look at Maudie McCarthy. She's been getting fifty quid a week since the *Mirror* had pictures of her shaving the Duke of Dudley in Reems (*Rheims*) Cathedral.

GUY (*Amused*): Maudie McCarthy in a cathedral! No wonder the Kaiser wanted it destroyed!

PHYLLIS (*With some warmth.*): Well, anyway, Maudie's getting big money for an act I'd be ashamed to look in the face.

GUY (*Dryly*): Another horror of war!

PHYLLIS (*In same tone as before*): I'll bet Maudie doesn't now know the inside of a cathedral from the Empire Promenade. But she knows how to work the papers, she does.

DORIS (*Interrupting*): You mean she's got a jolly good press agent.

PHYLLIS: I wish to God I had one! I say, Guy, why don't you do something like that for me? You're supposed to be a journalist, aren't you?

GUY: So you want to bombard the British public in the guise of a female barber—what?

PHYLLIS: That's old stuff now. But can't you think up something just as good.

GUY: Twenty if you like. (*With more enthusiasm*) I'll tell you what: you split the deal with me on what you make out of it and I'll show you a new form of theatrical larceny that'll bring a contract with every post.

PHYLLIS: Ripping! What is it?

GUY: You go to the Red Cross people and offer your services as a reader of letters to the wounded. Tell 'em that your voice is restful and sympathetic, and that you have winning ways, a warm heart and a cool hand.

PHYLLIS (*Amused*): And that I stand without hitching, I suppose. But then what?

GUY: Why then you cuddle up alongside of a wounded hero and read all his love letters to him. That's where the dirty work begins.

DORIS (*With a laugh*): Phyllis has slipped enough soft stuff into letters to know how the writers want them read.

PHYLLIS: That's all right, but where does the spotlight come in?

GUY (*Rising and walking up and down*): That's my job, and I'm the only chap in London who can put it over for you properly. In the first place, I know the real people out at St. David's Hospital. No leaving your own safe country necessary; you just go out there and they'll be waiting for you, arms outstretched. They'll walk you right into a ward, hand you over a bundle of letters to read and guide you to a bed. Just as you have started warbling some sweet-heart's love notes, click will go a camera and you're on your way to the head lines. Nothing wrong about it, you understand. It works both ways. Pictures bring the money in; some to us and some to St. David's.

PHYLLIS (*Quite enthused with the idea*): That's some scheme. I'll get the cigarettes and ragtime massaged out of my throat and be Tommy's own voice-from-home.

GUY: You'll have to brush up your acting a bit and learn a brogue or two. (*Picturing the future.*) Ah, but can you do it? I can hear you now giving a Redmond Redcoat the news from his mavourneen in Tipperary. "Shure an' is it thrue, Paddy bhoys, that the Kaiser looks like Carson?" (*Lights cigarette, lolls back on sofa.*)

DORIS: Can you get away with it, Phyllis?

PHYLLIS: Can I get away with it? (*Pointing to Guy on sofa.*) See that poor, wounded Highlander over there? (*Moves towards sofa burlesquing manner of trained nurse.*)

DORIS (*Looking at Guy*): He's been bayoneted by Johnny Walker.

PHYLLIS (*Roughly pushing Guy's head back on pillow and deftly snatching letter from his pocket*): Ma poor wee mon, and how is your haggis today, and should I read you a little blather from your heeland lassie?

(*Guy raises his head to smile at Doris in appreciation of way Phyllis gets the idea.*)

(*Phyllis slaps head down on pillow.*)

PHYLLIS: Rest yourself th' noo, ye saft gillie, while I read you the burning words from your little spring of heather in Dundee.

(*Curtain starts to descend as Phyllis, pretending to read from letter, breaks into "It's a wee doch and doris"*)

END OF SCENE I.

SCENE II.—*Phyllis' Flat.*

TIME—10 a. m. a week later.

(*Phyllis standing at center table wearing shirtwaist and skirt, looking at circular.*)

(*Enter Guy hurriedly with several newspapers.*)

PHYLLIS: Good morning, Guy. (*Spoken dully and without enthusiasm.*)

GUY (*Snappily*): I say, have you seen how they fell for it?

PHYLLIS (*Apathetically*): Who fell for what?

GUY (*Cheerily*): The newspapers, of course, old thing. Every sheet from the Times to Tid-Bits has you immortalized this morning.

PHYLLIS (*Dully*): No, I've not seen them.

GUY (*Surprised*): You haven't? Well, here's a sample—simply top-hole.

(*Phyllis sinks into chair.*)

GUY: Listen to this—

(*Reads with exaggerated manner and frequent chuckles while Phyllis listens with wide-open eyes and growing expression of pain and distaste.*)

“The talent of our country is now generously at the disposal of our wounded—the vibrant appeal of Miss Phyllis Knight's sympathetic voice—it can only be hoped that others will follow her pure, unselfish example”——

PHYLLIS (*Turning suddenly and interrupting reading*): How beastly (*Repeats bitterly*). Her pure, unselfish example!

GUY (*Rummaging among the papers in his hand*): If that isn't strong enough, how about this little one? It cost me two drinks more than the others.

(*Reads again from another paper while Phyllis listens with expression of ever-deepening disgust.*)

“The stage has often been slandered as a profession which lays stress upon the shadow rather than the substance, the semblance of fine actions rather than fine actions themselves—The sweet-voiced Miss Phyllis Knight reading to our wounded heroes

the tear-stained letters—unostentatiously, without the blare of trumpets and with her reward in the doing of her noble, self-imposed task'—

PHYLLIS (*Stepping forward from window*): Stop it, for God's sake! (*Throwing herself back into chair and burying face in hands*) I can't stand it! I can't stand it!

GUY (*Amazed*): What's up?

PHYLLIS: Everything! (*Defiantly*) I'm going to chuck it all.

GUY (*Starting up in bewilderment*): What do you mean! Going to chuck what?

PHYLLIS: This whole rotten business—this beastly game you and I have been playing at— Oh! can't you see what I mean?

GUY (*Recovering himself, soothingly*): You're losing your mind, old dear. (*Goes to her and puts his arm about her.*)

PHYLLIS (*Appealingly*): Don't you understand, Guy?

GUY (*Amused*): No, my poor unfortunate, I don't. (*Bending over her with amused sympathy*) Tell it all to Poppa. Why the big sob?

PHYLLIS (*Drawing away from him yet speaking almost tenderly*): I wonder if I can make you understand.

(*Pause.*)

(*Guy, still completely in the dark, but sensing a scene, forces a laugh as he rises, lights cigarette and throws himself on another chair.*)

(*Phyllis suddenly turns and faces Guy, speaking abruptly.*)

PHYLLIS: When I say I'm going to chuck it all, Guy, I mean I can't bear to go to these hospitals thinking only of myself when God knows I ought to be thinking only of the poor devils back from the front. Why, it's—it's—

GUY (*Interrupting brusquely*): Good heavens! Aren't you reading them their letters?

PHYLLIS (*Passionately*): Yes, when a photographer's there to take me doing it! (*Rises and moves to table near Guy.*) God! Can't you feel the fake of it all? I go there gowned like a strumpet. I suffocate the clean smell of the ether with the stink of my perfumes. I'm unreal, selfish, useless. I'm acting a living lie. (*Softly and slowly*) And all the time the living truth is staring me in the face. (*She falls back a step or two, trembling with excitement.*)

GUY (*Applauding sarcastically*): Priceless, my dear Phyllis! Quite worthy of Bernhardt. How long is this spasm to last?

PHYLLIS (*Controlling her emotions, gazing curiously at Guy as if seeking to fathom his cynical lack of understanding and speaking in an even tone*): Really, I don't quite know—perhaps as long as the war—perhaps longer.

GUY: Ah! Enlistment for the war only. Sure, there's no fear of your deserting when I read you this? (*Drawing paper from pocket.*)

(*Phyllis turns away with a slight shrug*)

GUY: This, my proud beauty, is a contract for twenty weeks over the Imperial Circuit at fifty pounds a week!

PHYLLIS (*Disdainfully*): As a press agent, Guy, you top the Kaiser! You've done jolly well, but the game was rotten. That contract is a grand climax to our little partnership, but I threw two better ones than that into the fire this morning.

GUY (*Starting up in sudden rage*): What in hell are you playing at? Who are you to run away from a camera? You've been trying to push your way into the papers all your life and now when I land you in every sheet in town you back away from it all like a scared school girl. Do you think you look like a flapper to me?

PHYLLIS (*Dispassionately*): I don't care what I *look* like, I only know I *feel* like a woman for the first time in my life—I suppose. A *real* woman, you know, not a gold-plated vanity case. That's what I *was*, Guy, but war sweeps aside a woman like that—makes her see just the sort of thing she is. I didn't know that until yesterday, because I didn't know before what war means.

GUY (*Sneeringly*): Fell in love with a Tommy, I suppose.

PHYLLIS: That's what you'd think, of course, but you're wrong. Yesterday I was sitting beside a young chap just brought back from the front. He was dying, they said. He'd been run through the lung with a bayonet and had lain in the mud and rain for two days before the Red Cross found him. I read a letter from his sweetheart and he asked me to write her a postcard, but one of your photographers made me move to where the light was better, and as I posed there in the midst of that suffering with a stage smirk on my face it came over me in a great rush what a sickening sham I was—what a dirty game I was playing! I tell you I

loathed myself! I got out of the hospital as quick as I could. I didn't even go back to that boy—I was too ashamed—so I fancy the postcard to his girl will never be written.

(During above, Guy's cynical attitude seems to fall from him. He is so engrossed with her words his cigarette drops from between his fingers.)

GUY (*Without bitterness*): Call our scheme a sham or anything you like, how are you going to get away from it now?

PHYLLIS (*Ferociously*): In the first place, I'm going to take another name. War has changed the woman; I can change her name myself. Then I'm going off to some little hospital in the country. I'm going to read letters if they want me to. But I'm also going to sew bandages and wash clothes and scrub floors, if they want me to do *that*. If you're real in times like these you'll help others, not hunt chances to help yourself.

GUY (*Reverting partially to cynicism*): You'll be quite a comfort to your country, won't you, old dear? I didn't even know you were English.

PHYLLIS: As it happens, I'm not English; where I was born doesn't count. It doesn't matter what country you're from when you're face to face with realities like this.

(Pause)

(Phyllis moves toward Guy, looks him hard in the face, speaking with a noticeable touch of scorn.)

PHYLLIS: But you are English, aren't you, Guy?

(Guy shrugs shoulders, then moves to table, stands there for a moment as if in deep thought. Business of shifting books about nervously.)

(Guy turns and takes step forward towards Phyllis as if about to speak. His face is graver than before.)

(Suddenly newsboy crying, "Latest War Extra—Despatches from the Front!"—is heard in the street. Guy's attitude changes to a listening one and he walks to window and glances out.)

(Phyllis meantime has sat down again and has been watching Guy closely, with questioning gaze. She, too, notices the newsboy's cry.)

GUY: We must get one of these papers!

PHYLLIS: Telephone the porter to have one sent up.

GUY: Righto! (*Takes up 'phone*) Oh, porter, send up one of those latest extras, will you, please? Thank you. (*Hangs up receiver*) Some more toilet talk about nutty chauffeurs, I fancy. Momentous war news that—

PHYLLIS (*Bitterly sarcastic*): Yes, it's shameful, isn't it, how Sir John French neglects you journalists in favor of his soldiers.

GUY: He might do *something* for us now and then!

(*Knock on door. Guy goes to door, opens it and takes paper, opens it and reads eagerly.*)

GUY: It *is* news from the front!

PHYLLIS: Good news?

GUY: Just three lines from French, but it says the Germans have fallen back ten miles.

(*Phyllis' face lights up and she claps her hands softly. Guy glances over rest of paper's front page.*)

GUY (*Enthusiastically*): By Jove! We're giving 'em hell on the Aisne.

PHYLLIS (*Bitterly, almost shouting the words*): We're giving them hell! *We!* Who do you mean by *we*?

GUY (*Glancing up from paper surprised*): Our troops, of course.

PHYLLIS (*Angrily*): And you have the cheek to say "we" when you mean the men out there in the trenches. You, who sit here in London and think only about whether the news from the front makes good reading—news that's written in the blood of men who are real men—not the pen-fighters of Leicester Square!

GUY (*Interrupting*): What fresh rot is this?

PHYLLIS (*Interrupting in turn, hotly*): Rot! Of course it's rot! Anything that's real is rot—helping your country when your country needs you is rot; but thank God there are lots of that kind of rotters in the firing line, and a good many more at home to take their places.

GUY: I suppose this howl means *I'm* a rotter because I don't give up more important work to vegetate in a training camp. Let me tell you, my ignorant infant, it's just as important in war, as in peace, for people to do the work they know best. Some men fight—some men write.

PHYLLIS: And war makes it plain enough which shall do which; the old men and the weaklings can do the writing; the young men must fight.

GUY: What do *I* know about soldiering? What I *do* know about is telling the country how to get soldiers—and that's important *enough*, isn't it?

PHYLLIS (*Passionately*): Important! Your work important! Great God, do you really imagine that twisting despatches from the front into flowery language helps your country—or yourself? (*Changing suddenly into pleading*) Can't you see, Guy, that what's needed now are men of the fighting age—men who are fit—men like yourself? Forget your swank, and your manicured nails, and all the rest of your *shams*, and face the *facts*.

GUY (*Evidently weakening*): But, Phyllis, journalism and journalists—

PHYLLIS (*Pressing her advantage*): Guy, I happened to read some verses the other day about one set of journalists “coining the tears of women to pennies on the street” (*Repeats slowly*) “coining the tears of women to pennies on the street”—just as you advised me to coin the groans of dying soldiers into a job on the Imperial Circuit at fifty quid a week. Ah, Guy! *can't* you see—*can't* you see?

(*Phyllis sinks into chair weeping silently.*)

GUY (*Rising, tossing away cigarette awkwardly*): Our boys are fighting well on the Aisne!

(*Sounds of pipes heard in the street outside.*)

(*Guy goes to window.*)

(*Gazing out, speaking as if to himself*): Scottish territorials! Going to the front!

(*Slight pause.*)

Wonder how *I'd* look in uniform!

(*Phyllis looks up swiftly, fresh hope in her glance. Guy turns and smiles a bit shame-facedly, and Phyllis rises and goes toward him with outstretched arms, as the pipes sound louder in the streets to the tune, "It's a Long Way to Tipperary!"*)

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